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ABSTRACT

One of a series dealing with current issues affecting language arts instruction, this paper focuses on providing for the intellectually gifted. It begins by observing that procedures identifying the gifted as those with "A" averages may actually ignore the gifted individual who has an extremely high IQ but only a "C" average. This is followed by a discussion of the various characteristics of gifted and talented individuals (curious, divergent, critical of self and others, persistent in pursuit of goals, sensitive to injustices, and perceptive of unusual relationships), noting that few of these characteristics are fostered in classrooms or tested by standardized instruments. The paper concludes with guidelines, summarized as strategies for action, that schools and teachers can follow as they design and implement programs related to the education of the gifted. (HOD)

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Support for Learning and Teaching of English

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PROVIDING FOR THE INTELLECTUALLY GIFTED

The Issue

With the renewed national interest in programs for gifted and talented students, many educators are becoming increasingly concerned about program design for these students. Usually, when teachers and administrators begin to create programs for the gifted and talented, they look first to the "best" students, those with the "A" averages, those whom teachers enjoy teaching. This narrow view of ability, however, will probably exclude most gifted individuals from special programs as teachers and common testing procedures tend to overlook them. Pegnato and Birch, for example, found in one study that many junior high school students with extremely high IQ's had "C" averages. Unfortunately, procedures that ignore such students are probably ignoring the gifted individuals who would benefit most from a program designed to accommodate and develop their special characteristics.

Professional Viewpoint

Most lists of characteristics of gifted and talented individuals include items such as curious, divergent, critical of self and others, persistent in pursuit of goals, sensitive to injustices, and perceptive of unusual relationships. Few of these characteristics, however, are fostered in classrooms or tested by standardized instruments. Indeed, students who possess these traits in the extreme are often penalized by both teachers and tests. For example, the student who is critical of self and others often encounters frustration and antagonism in the classroom. Being critical of self, the student feels dissatisfied with a work and continues to perfect the work past the "deadline," receiving a lower grade for lack of responsibility and punctuality. The student's reluctance to accept superficial answers and tendency to pursue questions beyond the answer given by the teacher or other classmates often creates classroom conflict. The divergent thinker is also at a disadvantage. Such a student seeks alternative answers to discussion questions while teacher and classmates wish to move the discussion forward to complete the immediate task. Most of the characteristics of the intellectually gifted lead to similar classroom experiences.

Even standardized tests work against these students. The tests accept only one answer as correct while many of these individuals can defend several alternatives as equally viable responses to the test questions. For these and other reasons, researchers such as Pegnato and Birch have found that teacher nomination of gifted students and group test scores with high "cut-off" levels (e.g., 130 IQ) overlook at least fifty percent of gifted students.

Although most gifted individuals are emotionally secure, the disapproval that many experience can cause some of these students to withdraw and refuse to commit themselves in front of their classmates. Others become rebellious, disrupting the class in ingenious ways to avoid demonstrating their abilities–and thereby expose themselves to further antagonism and frustration. Yet these are the same individuals who, if allowed to develop their abilities, could provide new solutions to our increasingly complex social ills.

Our gifted students–like all of our students–need to acquire faith in their abilities. Some are able to do this within the traditional framework of the school; their characteristics are constantly rewarded by teachers and classmates. However, many other gifted students receive only negative reinforcement for exhibiting their abilities, and this too often creates serious conflicts between them, their teachers, and their fellow students. If we really wish to develop those abilities we cite as characteristic of the gifted and talented, we must develop appropriate methods of identifying these individuals. We must modify our programs and teaching strategies to build upon these students' unique strengths.

Recent research and curriculum development related to the education of gifted students suggest a number of guidelines that schools and teachers can follow as they design and implement new programs. These guidelines, summarized below as strategies for action, are amplified in the various resources listed at the end of this discussion.

Strategies for Action

Identification of Intellectually Gifted

1. Do *not* rely solely on the traditional measures of ability, especially standardized tests, teacher recommendations, or grades. These measures often fail to locate all of the intellectually gifted individuals, and may penalize certain students because of their exceptional traits. In addition, students whose cultural backgrounds differ from the majority are further penalized by culturally biased questions and attitudes.
2. Develop a variety of procedures that highlight the characteristics of the intellectually gifted and provide in-service training in the use of these procedures. In addition to school data, look at outside interests and activities. This can be done through autobiographies, biographical inventories, interest surveys, personal interviews, parent contact, and peer nomination. Look too at student work in areas of individual

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interest. The work a student produces when interested and given sufficient time will reveal more about abilities than will grades or test scores.

3. Develop procedures that will identify intellectually gifted individuals who have been unsuccessful within the academic program. The students who may need the program the most are those who are failing to develop their potential.
4. Finally, try to include as many potentially gifted individuals in the program as possible. Results on the various assessment instruments should be used to identify areas of special aptitude, rather than to exclude possible "non-gifted" students by demanding high ratings in all areas.

Program Design

1. Design a curriculum that builds upon the characteristics of the intellectually gifted and helps them develop these traits in a productive manner. While all students need to develop "basic skills," gifted students can often acquire these as they develop their other, more advanced abilities.
2. Provide for continuity. Teachers and administrators at all grade levels should arrive at a consensus regarding the different components of the program and the procedures for carrying it through the grades.
3. Select teachers on the basis of ability to work with the intellectually gifted. Usually, these teachers should be vitally interested in the gifted and talented, be highly intelligent, possess advanced knowledge of their subject matter, and be emotionally secure.
4. Evaluate success within the program on the quality of work produced rather than by tests of mastery of lower level skills. This will often necessitate the design of new evaluation instruments and procedures, as most of the tests we currently use measure acquisition of knowledge rather than ability to apply knowledge in creative ways.

Frederick B. Tuttle, Jr.
(For the NCTE/SLATE Steering Committee on Social and Political Concerns)

Resources

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